

Introduction to the Special Issue

The Last Mile: When Policies Go Local

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The study of local politics and policies in such a diverse country as Italy can be both remarkable and hopeless. On the one hand, going local to study politics allows us to discover how political preferences vary in proximate contexts and how elected representatives distribute power across levels of government, placing emphasis on centre-periphery relations (Page and Goldsmith 1987). On the other, going local to study policies allows us to consider what public agencies do when they apply seemingly self-executory policy measures at the decentralized level, showing the importance of implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Ultimately, going local is a good way to discover how politics and policies are intertwined, by investigating the relationship between performance and perceived legitimacy (Dente 1985; 1997; Capano and Lippi 2018), especially when the political system is geared towards a majoritarian logic that allows clear alternation in power after the polls – such as after the so-called direct election of a mayor in Italy (Bobbio 2005a).

All in all, going local has proved to be innovative in both theory and empirics. In this sense, the ‘local’ is the natural scene for democratic and institutional experimentation. On the politics side, while Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work* came out as a study of democratic performance of the newborn Italian Regions, scholars such as Caciagli, Riccamboni, Cartocci and Trigilia described the political subcultures focusing on partisan organizations at the local level (Baccetti and Messina 2009). On the policy side, the implementation of national policies offered a unique opportunity for the application of problem-solving as the proper analytical perspective for policy studies in the country (Dente et al. 1990). Later on, the ‘local’ paved the way for studies about administrative reforms and democratic experimentation (Bobbio 2002; 2005b). Nowadays, it still offers a privileged perspective on policy innovation and learning (Di Giulio and Vecchi 2018), on the effects of reforms on local public services (Citroni et al. 2015; Galanti 2016), and on the complex multi-level implications of austerity policies (Lippi and Tsekos 2019; Bolgherini and Dallara 2016), while disclosing emerging phenomena (Bassoli and Polizzi 2019).

However interesting the ‘local’ might be, perils for unfortunate researchers abound. First, there is *the accessibility problem*. Usable data can hardly be relied on for most dimensions related to the input, output or, most importantly, the outcome of the policy process. With the exception of the electoral ones, data on local politics and policies are incomplete or inaccurate or, more often than not, simply not there. Second, there is *the*

comparability problem. Official data sources are often aggregated at higher territorial levels, so fine-grained and comparable measures about salient political and policy issues are scarce. Third, there is *the exceptionalism problem*. Comparison often seems at odds with the specificity of the local context, so that scientific explanations tend to apply only to one case, without making sense of different case studies. Moreover, replicability is unlikely, also because accurate in-depth case study research relying on interviews and process tracing is extremely time consuming. Last but not least, there is *the theoretical problem*, as the proximity between local actors and their sensitivity to contextual conditions makes it rather difficult to find a theory that fits, or to be able to generate hypotheses to generalize the empirical findings.

Still, going local still means dipping into the reality of politics and policies, and this often makes empirical research on local governments and policies highly innovative and insightful and, thus, necessary. The articles in this focus on IPS offer examples of how to turn research problems into opportunities.

First, the accessibility of data can be tackled by seeking other sources of data, building a new dataset, and ultimately focusing on unconventional research questions. Most policies remain on paper until they arrive at the local level, where purposeful actors implement them following strategic considerations. Searching for (as yet unused) data, collected by a number of institutions and organizations at the local level, allows us to shed light on side effects and unexpected consequences that anticipate future developments. This is what emerges in the analysis of Elisa Rebessi of the implementation of the Italian Code of Public Contracts (Rebessi 2019, this issue). Building a brand-new dataset on judicial decisions on the awarding of contracts by the Regional Administrative Courts in Milan, Rome and Turin, and using measures to assess competitiveness in these contexts, Rebessi shows that municipal officers act strategically in shaping the content of the contracts in order to avoid contestation. At the same time, the analysis unveils a side effect: by making the content of the contracts more detailed and rigid, local administrations may paradoxically experience accrued litigation from competing enterprises on the local market.

Second, the comparability problem can be faced by downsizing the analysis to more homogeneous units, amassing qualitative evidence from interviews with different stakeholders in the same cities, while collecting other structural information (e.g. on networks). The comparison between similar cases proves, then, to be empowered by a research question that is original, because it adds a new perspective to the existing literature. This is what emerges from the work of Andrea Pettrachin (2019) in this issue of IPS. He analyses how sensemaking processes affect the implementation of social utility work as an instrument of migration policy in several cities in the Veneto Region. By considering not only the rational motivations of mayors but also their emotional component, the analysis unveils that mayoral decisions depend both on how the issue is perceived in the communities, but also on how they interpret their identity as mayors, including partisanship. In particular, the analysis of how these mayors make sense of their decisions on migration policies shows that partisan mayors tend to behave differently from independent ones.

Third, the exceptionalism problem is confronted by crafting better research designs. Even when a case seems specific to one time and one place, the research should be designed, as the case is one instance among many others. In other words, the researcher has

to be skilled at justifying the case selection, while acknowledging that also in a single case study there might be an explicit or implicit comparison with similar cases (Gerring 2007). In this way, even a single case allows us to discover aspects that might configure as recurring trends for a phenomenon. By selecting a pilot study for the analysis of the implementation of rationalization of municipal corporations, Stefania Profeti reinforces existing knowledge about both policies and political parties. On the one hand, the analysis of rationalization policies in Leghorn under the Five Star Movement confirms that centre-periphery relations still matter for national parties, while the institutionalization of the Movement translates into a centralization of decision-making, especially with regard to apparently ‘local’ problems laden with symbolic meanings. On the other hand, the analysis shows that mayors adapt national policies using a strategic reframing of the issues, and strategically choose from among an array of options, but with constant attention to perceived legitimacy and citizens’ expectations, as their political careers (also) depend on this.

Finally, there is the theoretical problem, which is not exclusive to local government studies. Indeed, this is the most challenging one, but also the most rewarding. To find theories that fit the cases, the researcher has to think at a higher level of abstraction, to discard the aspects that are not relevant to the research question, and finally to take from the findings only those dimensions and relations that explain something – and that are more likely to be present in similar cases. This can be done either when the researcher already has a theory in mind and needs a local case to test it – such as positive political theory in the article by Rebessi – or when he/she is struggling to make sense of a new phenomenon, such as the implementation of a top-down rationalization programme by a new political force in the article by Profeti.

All this requires a solid base of theoretical awareness, a steady orientation towards empirical knowledge, plus a good deal of stubbornness in seeking until you find (Profeti 2010). The future of local politics and policies relies on the capacity of our community to develop proper research agendas to design a collection of case studies under a shared framework and research question, or to invest in a sort of ‘inventive individualism’, with in-depth case studies on understudied phenomena which are telling of trends in both politics and policies, from the distribution of power to the use of policy instruments.

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